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SUBJECT: SANT'EGIDIO OUTLINES AFRICAN DIPLOMATIC OUTREACH

Classified By: Minister Political Counselor Josiah B. Rosenblatt

1. (SBU) Summary: Community of Sant'Egidio representatives reviewed their diplomatic outreach in Africa during meetings with Africa Watcher on the margins of the Community's 19th annual congress in Lyon, France, September 11-13. Sant'Egidio's 1992 role in brokering peace negotiations to end the civil war in Mozambique has translated into continuing efforts to insert the Community into African efforts at conflict resolution. Notable areas where Sant'Egidio's Africa cell is trying to contribute to peace include the Great Lakes, Sudan, Togo, and Cote d'Ivoire. The Community has lately garnered increased attention from a French government faced with growing unrest in Francophone Africa. End Summary.

2. (U) Africa Watcher met with key members of the Sant'Egidio "Africa cell" during the Community's annual congress with world religious and government leaders, held September 11-13 in Lyon, France. The attendance of Mozambican President Guebeza and former Portuguese President Soares on center stage drew attention to Sant'Egidio's role in brokering peace negotiations to end the civil war in Mozambique in the early 1990s. (Note: Guebeza headed the Government of Mozambique's delegation during the nearly two years of talks in Trastevere, Rome.) French Minister of Interior Sarkozy represented the French Government as a keynote speaker, addressing the French model of separation of Church and State.

Sudan: Getting to know Salva Kir, Mediating with the Beja

3. (SBU) Fabrizio Riccardi, who spearheads Sant'Egidio efforts on Sudan, praised the achievements of U.S. policy in reaching a peace agreement for the North-South and in bringing a measure of stability to Darfur. Ensuring continuity after the sudden death of John Garang was a top priority, he said. Sant'Egidio had enjoyed a good relationship with Garang. (Note: Riccardi, a medical doctor, treated Garang's wife during a mid-90s visit. His diagnosis of her pregnancy came as a surprise and created a bond with Garang, who subsequently named the daughter Roma, he claimed.) Sant'Egidio had no links to speak of to Salva Kir, Garang's successor as SPLM/A leader and 1st Vice President of Sudan. Working through Kir's aide Samson Kwaje, Sant'Egidio was making overtures to host Salva Kir in Rome, with an eye to opening a dialogue on outreach to Darfur.

4. (SBU) Riccardi said exchanges continued between Darfur rebel leaders and Sant'Egidio, building on the May 2005 meetings in Rome organized under the aegis of the Community in close coordination with AF/SPG. Sant'Egidio shared USG concerns that the Abuja talks could suffer if plans for an SLM conference within Darfur at the same time go forward. He asserted that Sant'Egidio had conveyed that position to SLM leader Minawi and urged, like the USG, that the SLM delay its meetings until after Abuja, preferably immediately before Ramadan. Fractures within the SLM were a major hurdle in advancing the strategy on Darfur, he said.

5. (C) Turning to unrest in eastern Sudan, Riccardi proposed that Sant'Egidio may be well-placed to launch a dialogue with Beja rebels, partly, he claimed, because Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki (whom Riccardi described as otherwise "raving mad") will not feel threatened by Sant'Egidio involvement in Asmara. Isaias visits Rome about twice a year and visits with Sant'Egidio, according to Riccardi. Isaias's benign attitude toward Sant'Egidio stems first and foremost from the Community's support -- including occasional meals -- for two former Eritrean rebel representatives present in Rome during the "Struggle." Sant'Egidio benefited, too, from carefully separating its approach from that of the Italian government, which had taken an outright pro-Ethiopian stance during the Ethiopian-Eritrean conflict, Riccardi said. Sant'Egidio's aims with the Beja were modest, for instance organizing a technical workshop. Sant'Egidio conveyed an initial invitation to the Beja just over two weeks ago and the response was encouraging.

West Africa: Inklings of the Sant'Egidio Rolodex

16. (C) Mario Giro, the Sant'Egidio sherpa for West Africa, said a number of parties to the Cote d'Ivoire unrest had been consulting the Community. Most prominently, Cote d'Ivoire President Gbagbo phones Giro directly almost every week, he said. Once Gbagbo tracked down Giro in Togo and immediately dispatched the presidential plane to fly Giro to Cote d'Ivoire, he said, adding how surreal it felt being the only passenger on board the jet. Everyone, including the French, was stymied, Giro said, claiming that French Presidential Adviser for Africa Michel de Bonnecorse calls him regularly, and that Nathalie de La Palme, the Quai counselor and architect of the Linas-Marcoussis accords, was traveling to Lyon for Tuesday, September 13 discussions. Even Charles Ble Goude, the Young Patriots militia leader, had approached Sant'Egidio to broker a meeting with the Quai d'Orsay, but the Quai had refused. In Giro's judgment, the present impasse could only be broken through a dramatic move, for instance, through USG collaboration with Sant'Egidio in arranging meetings with the parties at a technical level -- meetings that, to be effective, should exclude the French, he added, given Ivoirians deep hostility toward Paris.

17. (SBU) On Togo, Giro said Sant'Egidio maintained contact with Information Minister Pitang Tchalla and was exploring organizing another encounter between President Faure and Olympio Gilchrist, in a sequel to the meeting arranged by Sant'Egidio in July 2005. It was important to nurture contact between the parties, he commented.

Great Lakes: Hope Remains on FDLR Return and Disarmament

18. (SBU) Don Matteo Zuppi, the lead Sant'Egidio Africanist, was emphatic in his belief that there was still a chance that the FDLR would abide by the terms of the Rome declaration, disarm, and return to Rwanda. However, the FDLR were looking first for assurances that, after their return, they would have some kind of status, even if short of that of a formal political party. The FDLR were also concerned about the nature of any judicial investigations that might follow, wanting their to be some provision for international or outside controls.

Comment

19. (C) Although in public Sant'Egidio continues to showcase its successful Mozambican mediation efforts of the early 90s, the Community is engaged in a discreetly expanding program of African outreach that seems to bring it into the margins of ever more crises of interest. These dedicated personalities, armed with a legion of mobile telephones, and enjoying a wide measure of trust, have remarkable access across Africa, and, it would appear, even within the French government. French consultation of Sant'Egidio, however, should not be taken as a complete vote of confidence. Is Bonnecorse really turning to Sant'Egidio as a back channel or a means to float trial balloons? Is he keeping tabs on Sant'Egidio activities and African reactions within a region once viewed as the French backyard? Or is he, too, hoping that Sant'Egidio's unique approach may just happen to land the big brass ring one more time? Despite high-level communications with Paris, Sant'Egidio's Mario Giro bluntly advised on the benefits of sidelining the French in Cote d'Ivoire mediation efforts. Fabio Riccardi similarly remarked to Africa Watcher that French ties in Chad would always disqualify France from a leadership role in addressing Darfur. At the Quai, Bruno Foucher, West Africa Director, reacted with interest to word of La Palme's planned visit to Lyon, but advised that her contacts can be ad hoc and should not be over-interpreted. Nonetheless, French interaction with Sant'Egidio appears to be growing, if only in recognition of the Community's own expanding outreach into Francophone Africa. Africa Watcher looks forward to Embassy Vatican's continued reporting on Sant'Egidio's diplomatic activities.

STAPLETON